DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 469 487 HE 035 312

TITLE	"The Illinois Commitment" Goal 5 Requirement: Assessment of Student Learning and Improving Program Quality. Putting Students First: Assessing the Mastery of Student Learning.
INSTITUTION	Illinois State Board of Higher Education, Springfield.
PUB DATE	2002-00-00
NOTE	10p.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.ibhe.state.il.us/Academic%20Affairs/ Conference/2002/White%20Paper.pdf.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Educational Assessment; Educational Objectives; Feedback; *Higher Education; State Programs; Student Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS	*Illinois

ABSTRACT

Goal 5 of "The Illinois Commitment," strategic plan for higher education in Illinois, stipulates that by 2004, all academic programs will systematically assess student learning and use assessment results to improve programs. This paper provides the history and context for the systematic assessment of student learning, including end-of-program evaluation. It also provides the definition of "assessment of student learning" used by the Illinois Board of Higher Education, and it clarifies the connections between assessment for student learning and other quality assurance elements established by the Board. The paper highlights the evidence needed for the assurance of quality, improvement, and accountability, and it proposes next steps and timelines for collaboration and the implementation of Goal 5 requirements. Key elements for "The Illinois Commitment" assessment of student learning are: (1) a statement of program goals and intended student learning outcomes developed by each program's faculty to reflect the uniqueness of that program; (2) systematic assessment of student learning using multiple qualitative and quantitative measures; (3) feedback from key stakeholders; (4) evidence of a formal and effective feedback/improvement mechanism; (5) monitoring of findings and recommendations by the institution at least once a year; and (6) assessment and improvement results submitted to the Illinois Board of Higher Education as part of an institution's normal schedule. Statewide conversations and workshops are planned to promote discussion about the Goal 5 objectives. (SLD)

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ED 469 487

Putting Students First:

Assessing Mastery of Student Learning

"The Illinois Commitment" Goal 5 Requirement: Assessment of Student Learning and Improving Program Quality

2002

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THE ILLINOIS COMMITMENT GOAL 5 REQUIREMENT: ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING AND IMPROVING PROGRAM QUALITY

Introduction

The Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) committed to re-evaluate and redesign its quality assurance processes for program approval and program review in October 1998, for the purpose of making them consistent with the values and priorities of a strategic plan that was, then, under development. The Board adopted that plan, *The Illinois Commitment*, in February 1999. Goal 5 of *The Illinois Commitment* focuses on the centrality of quality in Illinois postsecondary education: "Illinois colleges and universities will hold students to even higher expectations for learning and will be accountable for the quality of academic programs and the assessment of learning." To further quality assurance, Goal 5 stipulates that, **"By 2004, *all* academic programs will systematically assess student learning and use assessment results to improve programs."**

The Board of Higher Education defines *The Illinois Commitment* requirement for "assessment of student learning in all programs" as the systematic (at different points throughout the program, including end-of-program evaluation) determination of what students know and are able to do as a result of completing a unique program of study. This assessment should include multiple qualitative and quantitative measures of student learning. These assessment results must then be used to improve the quality of curriculum, teaching, and student learning.

The Board believes that general education is the foundation of all academic programs and, thus, is of critical importance to the quality of each program, as well as a student's ability to apply content to the major. In addition, the Board believes that it is important to identify weaknesses in the general education curriculum and student performance before students complete their program of study. General education provides a broad foundation for all subsequent in-depth learning. It introduces students to a diversity of disciplinary content and a range of methodological and ontological approaches to organizing knowledge. The multidisciplinary skills and perspectives learned in general education enrich the deeper, more focused study in the major.

The purposes of this paper are: to provide the history and context for the systematic assessment of student learning, including end-of-program evaluation; to provide the Board's definition of "assessment of student learning;" to clarify the connections between assessment of student learning and other IBHE quality assurance elements; to highlight the evidence needed for the assurance of quality, improvement, and accountability; and to propose next steps and timelines for collaboration and implementation of the Goal 5 requirement.

Illinois Board of Higher Education Quality Assurance Elements

Quality assurance is not new to Illinois institutions of higher education. Institutions regularly undergo quality review and evaluation from regional accrediting associations, and

ED035312

special and professional accrediting bodies periodically review and accredit or deny accreditation for particular academic programs. In addition, some institutions conduct their own internal quality reviews, some using external reviewers.

Historically, IBHE had two quality assurance requirements in place to determine and monitor quality and report on performance: Academic Program Approval and Academic Program Review. In the **Academic Program Approval** process, the Board required proposed degree programs to undergo a rigorous analysis to meet specific Board criteria in order to gain approval prior to implementation. In **Academic Program Review**, the Board required institutions to review all certificate and degree programs every eight years on an IBHE-mandated schedule to monitor quality, identify needed improvements, or make recommendations to boards of trustees for closure.

In 1999, the Board adopted *The Illinois Commitment*, a framework for focusing on the priority needs of the state and its residents. As a means of assuring quality, progress and public accountability for this set of strategic priorities, the Board required a third quality assurance and accountability process--an annual progress report on the six goals, the **Institutional Results Reports**, beginning in August 1999. Included in *The Illinois Commitment* were two other quality and accountability requirements: **Assessment of Student Learning** and **Statewide Performance Measures**.

In 1998, the Board committed to re-evaluate and redesign its quality assurance processes and its reporting requirements. In the interim, Board staff worked with the Chief Academic Officers of the public colleges and universities and a Redesign Working Group to remove redundancies and sharpen focus in the processes and reporting. Academic Program Approval and Academic Program Review were redesigned to focus on outcomes and include the requirement of Assessment of Student Learning as criteria for approval and review. In addition, Board staff has worked with the Chief Academic Officers of the public colleges and universities to develop guidelines, key elements, and next steps for *The Illinois Commitment* requirement for assessment of student learning. Another group of institutional representatives, some of whom are Chief Academic Officers, currently is working with Board staff to develop Statewide Performance Measures for the six goals of *The Illinois Commitment*.

By 2004, the redesigned IBHE quality assurance processes will include four integrated elements: Academic Program Approval, Assessment of Student Learning, Academic Program Review and Improvement, and Institutional Results Reports. An additional element of the Board's quality and accountability processes is Statewide Performance Measures, currently under development with institutional representatives.

Redesigned Program Approval shifted emphasis from inputs to outcomes and removed redundancies in processes required for approval. Recent minor modifications to the application form will: sharpen the focus of questions; explicitly integrate the requirements of Assessment of Student Learning, including requiring evidence of a commitment to a monitoring and feedback mechanism for improving curriculum, instruction, and learning; require inclusion of a statement of expected student learning outcomes; and require a description of the process and elements by which student learning will be assessed in order to gain approval.

Redesigned Academic Program Review decentralizes timetables, priorities and processes to the institutions, but requires institutions to prioritize programs for review that may have quality or viability issues; implement Assessment of Student Learning in all academic programs; provide evidence of findings and recommendations; and submit evidence of a

formalized and effective feedback mechanism. The Board will continue the requirement that all current academic programs be reviewed at least once every eight years; however, in the redesigned Program Review process, institutions determine their own schedule for reviewing programs and may use the reviews from specialized accreditors or other internal or external review processes, rather than being required to conduct a redundant review for IBHE. The redesigned Program Review shifts the emphasis to student learning outcomes and to a feedback mechanism for on-going faculty engagement to improve curriculum, assessment, teaching, and learning.

Assessment of Student Learning is the systematic (at different points throughout the program, including end-of-program evaluation) determination of what students know and are able to do as a result of completing a unique program of study. This assessment should include multiple qualitative and quantitative measures of student learning. These assessment results must then be used to improve the quality of curriculum, teaching, and student learning. Assessment of Student Learning is the central integrating quality assurance and improvement element between Academic Program Approval and Academic Program Review and Improvement.

Institutional Results Reports, in addition to containing the progress reports on the six goals, will be the vehicle to which a summary of findings and recommendations from the Program Review and Improvement and evidence regarding Assessment of Student Learning (in the reviewed program) will be appended. The Results Report also will serve as the vehicle for an institution's reporting to the Board in its Statewide Performance Measures.

Statewide Performance Measures, currently under development with institutional leaders, will measure an institution's progress toward the six goals of *The Illinois Commitment.* These performance measures include three types of indicators directly related to *The Illinois Commitment:*

- State-level indicators – pertaining to the performance of Illinois' system of higher education as a whole;
- "Common" institutional indicators – related to the statewide goals for higher education enumerated in *The Illinois Commitment.*
- Mission-specific indicators – pertaining to each institution's unique role and mission within the overall context of *The Illinois Commitment.*

Institutions will select a limited number of "mission specific indicators" and identify these indicators (no data required in 2002) as a part of their 2002 Results Reports.

Inputs Assessment—An Historical Focus

The assessment of quality in higher education has traditionally focused on inputs: faculty, curriculum, incoming students, and the fiscal, administrative, and physical plant infrastructures of institutions. These indicators continue to serve as hallmarks of quality with reviews occurring at the national, state, and institutional levels. Regional accrediting bodies play a powerful role in defining, evaluating, and validating the integrity of all institutions of higher education. Accreditation by professional associations is another long-standing approach to assessing program quality. Many academic programs undergo rigorous inspection and regular oversight by such specialized accreditors as the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET), the American Psychological Association (APA), and the National Council

for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). While not all academic programs have a formal accreditation process, many professional societies, such as the American Historical Association, regularly devote portions of their annual meetings to exploring quality in their respective disciplines.

Academic quality is further monitored by a variety of professional boards and societies that oversee the licensure and certification of professionals in their fields. State governments authorize many of these boards. Various state agencies also conduct institutional and program reviews and are responsible for oversight of programs at many levels. Many institutions also assess the activities of faculty and students in an academic unit through their own regular program review, often employing faculty consultants external to the unit and/or the state in the program review process.

Outcomes Assessment—A Comprehensive Emphasis

In recent years, external stakeholders have wanted to know what the outcomes of learning are, and they wanted to be assured that institutions are committed to continuous quality improvement. While there has been a strong tradition of commitment to outcomes assessment in many fields, there also has been a call for the development and measurement of learning and other outcomes in *all* programs, including general education. Responding to internal imperatives and societal pressure, states and institutions have developed increasingly more focused means of identifying and measuring quality, including measuring student-learning outcomes. It is important that these measures not be reduced to a single instrument such as a standardized test. Rather, meaningful assessment of student learning outcomes requires multiple measures that include both qualitative and quantitative approaches at different points throughout the program, including end-of-program assessment.

In general, outcomes assessment methods focus on processes and products, ensuring that assessment results are implemented to yield improvements in curriculum, instruction, and student learning. Key questions in outcomes-based assessment of student learning include:

- What should students know and be able to do as a result of having completed a program of study?
- Did the students achieve what they were reasonably expected to achieve?
- How do we know?
- If the desired outcomes were not achieved, how is assessment information used to improve curriculum, teaching, and learning?
- What is the evidence that monitoring feedback and adjustments actually improved the curriculum, instruction, and student learning?

Key Concepts in Assessing Student Learning and Improving Program Quality

A recent American Association of Higher Education (AAHE) document entitled *Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning,* includes the following characteristics of a good assessment process: The educational enterprise subscribes to a statement of values; a definition of learning has been developed (across time, multidimensional, integrated); the purposes of the educational experience are clearly stated; there is a recognition

that outcomes are important, but so also is the process that got the student there; and quality is defined by the whole academic community.

In recent years, the Higher Learning Commission/North Central Association (NCA), along with other regional accrediting bodies, has turned to formalizing this assessment of student learning outcomes and has identified the assessment process as a necessary element of quality. The North Central Association requires that every accredited institution implement a comprehensive process to assess student academic achievement. Key components of the NCA process include: "identifying learning expectations, determining the outcomes of assessing student learning across academic programs, and using assessment results to improve student learning."

For example, NCA differentiates between direct and indirect measures of student achievement. Direct measures include evaluation of capstone experiences, internships, and student portfolios; performance on locally developed student performance instruments, standardized tests, or on professional licensure and certification exams; performance on affective measures such as sensitivity to cultural and global diversity, evidence of good citizenship (values, ethics, engagement); and effective demonstration of the skill of learning as an outcome. Indirect measures include surveys of student satisfaction, alumni job placement/satisfaction, employment, and employer satisfaction as outcomes.

Assessment of general education is key to evaluating the outcomes of the baccalaureate degree. To date, most assessment efforts have focused on specific units of knowledge and content or skills assessment; however, accrediting bodies have shown greater interest in overall general education assessment as they have turned their attention to student learning outcomes. Overall, outcomes assessment is, to a large extent, a work-in-progress, but one that will likely merit closer scrutiny and further refinement.

Recommended IBHE Guidelines for Goal 5: Assessment of Student Learning and Program Improvement

The following guidelines should inform the development of student learning assessment and program improvement:

1. Assessment plans and quality processes should be faculty, program, and campus-driven.

2. Assessment plans and program approval and review processes should build on existing activities, i.e., integrate and expand on existing assessment activities.

3. Assessment activities should focus on the measurement and improvement of student learning outcomes, including multiple qualitative and quantitative assessments, as appropriate to the discipline.

4. Assessment of mastery and quality should not be a one-time event, but rather, a continuing process that monitors and self-regulates the educational enterprise to ensure that quality is continually enhanced.

Key Elements for *The Illinois Commitment* Assessment of Student Learning

The Illinois Board of Higher Education recommends that all program assessments include the following six elements:

1. A statement of program goals and intended student learning outcomes developed by each program's faculty that reflects uniqueness of that program.

2. Systematic (at different points throughout the program, including end-of-program evaluation) assessment of student learning that uses multiple qualitative and quantitative measures and reflects the uniqueness of academic programs and disciplines *(e.g., evaluation of capstone experiences, internships, portfolios, and other types of performance measurements; performance on standardized, locally-developed, or professional licensure and certification exams).*

3. Feedback gathered from key stakeholders—current students, alumni, and employers of graduates, graduate schools, etc., *(e.g., surveys of student and alumni satisfaction; alumni job placement information; employer satisfaction).*

4. Evidence of a formal and effective feedback/improvement mechanism, i.e., that the program faculty are engaged in a regular assessment and review process, and that the assessment of student learning and stakeholder feedback are used to improve curriculum, instruction, and learning.

5. **Findings and recommendations for improvement are monitored by the institution for results at least yearly.**

6. Assessment and improvement results are submitted to IBHE as part of an institution's normal schedule for reporting Program Review findings and recommendations, which are appended to the Institutional Results Report.

Proposed Next Steps and Timelines

General Education and Discipline-Specific Assessment Workshops

In addition to its broader purpose, this paper is intended to serve as the basis for a state-level workshop and discipline-specific and general education discussions about student learning assessment involving academic leaders from two- and four-year institutions across the state. Participants in the initial state-level workshop will include institutional teams comprised of deans, department chairs, faculty members, assessment coordinators, and others as appropriate to the institution. In addition to reviewing the IBHE assessment expectations, these conversations are meant to clarify and solidify the understandings regarding the assessment requirement and its critical connection to the Program Review and Improvement, Institutional Results Reports, and Program Approval processes.

At two summer workshops (June 18 and July 24, 2002), academic leaders will explore the principles and practices outlined in this paper to determine how they may best be adapted by individual programs to implement assessment of student learning. It will be especially important to the initial statewide discussion that departmental/discipline leadership be engaged, since these individuals will lead the implementation of student learning assessment at the program level, for the purpose of improving curriculum, teaching, and student learning outcomes.

These summer workshops will feature Illinois "experts" on assessment, including presentations by beginning, developing, and mature assessment programs. The Board will invite Illinois institutions to submit their own best-practice assessment and improvement models in

Arts, Sciences, Humanities, Professional, and Occupational programs. Discipline-specific and various maturity-level models (beginning, implementation, and established) will be featured at the workshop.

These statewide conversations, together with feedback from Illinois academic leadership, will result in specific outcomes: (1) holding regional or discipline-specific workshops to further operationalize best practices in assessing student learning outcomes and program improvement models; (2) providing incentives for institutions to hold similar institutional-level follow-up workshops to disseminate the findings of these statewide conversations; and (3) submitting brief implementation status reports on assessment activities appended to the 2002, 2003, and 2004 Results Report.

Timeline

Illinois Board of Higher Education staff has established the following timeline for implementation of these recommended principles and guidelines.

December -February 2002	Share paper with Academic Leadership of public colleges and universities for comment and refinement.
March-April 2002	Disseminate revised paper to all Chief Academic Officers and an RFP to solicit best practice models of student learning assessment and program improvement.
June, July 2002	Convene a statewide workshop for institutional teams for the purposes of disseminating IBHE overview of assessment of student learning guidelines, expectations, and clarifying connections to other IBHE quality assurance requirements; and presenting best practice assessment and improvement models from Illinois institutions, with breakout sessions devoted to general education and various academic, professional and occupational disciplines, including beginning, developing, and mature assessment and improvement models, as well as institutional team planning.
Fall 2002	Convene regional, on-campus, and follow-up assessment workshops.
August 2002; August 2003; August 2004	Brief status report (appended to the Institutional Results Report) on the development and implementation of assessment plans for general education and each academic program.
Academic Year 2004 -2005	Implement *The Illinois Commitment* requirement that, "all academic programs will systematically assess student learning and use assessment to improve programs" using the IBHE definition, guidelines, and key elements.

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